The Shunned Seer

By: Jasmine

Note: This book is just a clearer transcription of the physical book. Official sources like my notes will only refer to the hardcopy version since it's the version I originally wrote in.

I'm just writing this version so that people can read it better (my handwriting sucks) and so I can properly send it to more people rather than lending one interested reader.

Some scenes are also cut and changed, but notes won't refer to those changes.

Every number in blue is the actual page number from the book.

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Prologue

During the thrashing storm, crying thunder and murky darkness, there comes a young boy stepping into a particular room. It was barely lit, so the scene was as bright as outdoors.

The feet sleeping on the wet floor indeed belonged to the same kid—one that's redhead, short and extravagantly-clothed.

"What did I miss?" he asked.

It was revealed through the lightning from the window that it was a classroom. There were students all hiding under or behind their tables and chairs respectively.

"Just like you've predicted—a storm *was* brewing," a girl told him. She unveiled herself by hopping above her beige table. Her eyes were a blazing amber. Her hair a sweet blend of reddish and light brown, forming a cool auburn. The glasses that covered her was pure rectangle. Green was her color, not figuratively so. /1 She was literally in an olive sweater.

But an ordinary student, she was not. It was Zina, the leader of the class, Class 2, a special class in an equally special school, Open Book School.

"It was a storm alright," Zina's partner, Alex, hissed. He was in yellow and white with slightly rounder glasses.

All the kids shivered, both cold and in fear.

"You know my predictions are always right. You lot are just in denial," the boy snorted. His cape swooped with the swift motions of his enraged hands.

"Where were you anyways, Troy? I tried calling for you!" Zina asked, trying to not duck down from the storm.

"Almost got lost. How about the teacher?" It was true—the teacher didn't seem to exist at the time.

“I suppose lost in the storm too,” Alex retorted.

Troy approached the seat in front of /2 Zina and sat casually, contrasting everyone else’s anxiety. For him, it was just any ordinary Tuesday, and for the rest of the classroom, it was the opposite. However, nobody appeared to have questioned Troy’s reaction. It might be normal.

Troy sat comfortably, as if he landed on his bed. The white noise of the rain drummed louder than the wails of his classmates, all shrieking with the rhythm of the cackles of mother nature.

Suddenly, after a couple quiet moments, his brain bursted in a frenzy of wild thoughts. Thoughts that shouldn’t be conceivable from a child. Murmurs wisped through his ears—not from his peers, but from his own inner-self.

The thunder roared more. The rain pounded the glass. The eerie mist outside almost bleeding past the walls. The cacophony of the surroundings didn’t irk Troy though, for all he was focused on were his dreams. /3

Zina had noticed that. “Troy?” she muttered.

He woke up. “I see… Zina…” His head slowly turned to her. “You will be destroyed before the sun’s farewell today.”

She blinked. Now everyone gazed at the strange student—the harshest being from the already tense Alex. The lightning cried even more.

“What?” the leader almost stammered.

“Zina, you will be in danger soon,” he repeated, now in a more urgent and blaring tone.

The girl began to excessively breathe. “How?!”

But Troy couldn’t say anything. He was frozen in his own fear. His phobia over her end stunned him, disabled his moment for what looked like the rest of the day.

“Troy!” Zina shouted, nearly in a wail.

Even Alex grew more anxious.

The students started to scream and bellow. “We’re going to die!” the girls chanted, started by Violet, a famously worried girl. /4

“Shut up, everyone!” Zina snapped.

Instantly, they sat still under the tables.

Soon after, the leader faced Troy, who continued to be a statue. The uncertainty crawled on her skin, turning venomous like a snake. Even after the teacher arrived and the weather calmed down, the odd student stayed still. He really only sprung back to life after the school bell rings.

Students kept pandering and theorizing about what he meant until the next day, where Zina, indeed, died. Killed in a murder committed by someone unknown even years later, although it’s commonly believed to be Terrance, a vicious murderer famous in New York City. Of course, it’s still a mystery and he was still in prison the whole time anyways.

Everyone grieved, as expected. And in retaliation for his prediction, Troy had to make a tough decision for himself.

As he was about to leave school a fortnight after the event, he turned back to view the grandiose view of the elusive K-12 school in all its glory… But he felt hollow. Nothing. “Goodbye, Open Book School…” he murmured. “Goodbye, Manhattan.” He choked to himself as silently as he could once he turned away, almost breaking into tears.

Yes, he eventually escaped from the bullying nightmare. But not only from the school, all of New York City too, where he lived all his life. Leaving everything behind due to humiliation. Since then, a legend spawned about him, being a great psychic, mainly in his old school. It was true—he *was* a psychic—yet he was a teller of evil. That’s what everyone believed and what was being rumored. /5

Chapter 1

Catching Up

Roughly five years later, the school that is Open Book School changed. New Students were introduced while old ones were adapting to it or leaving. One of the new students is the bland, ordinary, northing special Bruno, a former student of its Brooklyn branch.

He had to move to Manhattan for his parents and for this school as he hated his middle school ones.

It was February 6, 2012. The second semester had started, and everyone was trying not to die from both sleep and their mediocre test results. Bruno was like everyone, as expected. A sleep-deprived, test-stressed zombie.

He shuffled his way out of his bus and escaped into the campus along with his friend, Blossom, a tall girl with long brown hair and a lengthy pink skirt that resembled a kimono. She wasn't Bruno's classmate, however, like the mutual they would meet later, Aster. /6

Indeed, Aster was quite short and had a purple shirt covered by a sleek black leather jacket. His sharp shadow hair covered one of his eyes, streaked with violet.

"Morning Aster!" Blossom greeted.

"Yo," Aster replied.

"Hey, you got to hear what Blossom told me about her trip to the Netherlands."

"What happened?" Aster asked curiously after what Bruno said. He prepped himself by clearing his throat. "Blossom met Ms. Delilah's cousin." The lady in question is the Class 1 homeroom teacher, the class being one of the four classes of the tenth grade.

“She has a Dutch cousin?” Aster was about to chortle in awe.

“Yeah. Turns out, she isn’t the only one to have a knack for acting too,” Blossom softly chuckled as she spoke.

Bruno seemed excited as he does like to chat with the teachers from time to time. Perhaps now he has a good topic /7 to bring up. What piqued Aster looks to be something else though.

“How about the exams? Got your results, or did you avoid it like my sister did?”

Aster had a smug smile afterwards while Bruno hissed. “I got my results alright.” It was pretty clear that they were far from impressive. He pulled his red backpack that he always carries, thrashed it to the ground and opened it to draw out his report card.

Soon, after some gazing, he showed it to his friends.

Subject	Grade
Math	C
English	A+
Biology	D
Chemistry	B
Physics	B
History	A
Geography	A

/8

More subjects were listed, but even Bruno blanked out when he saw them. Suddenly, a voice of delicate sympathy could be heard. “It’s alright. You got amazing grades in English and Geography!” It was from Blossom.

Aster nodded joyfully.

“How about you guys?” Bruno asked.

“I did better than my classmates. They all whined in a group video call!” Blossom laughed with a side of Bruno chuckling along.

Aster, with the smile causing it, just shrugged. “I did well in English, Cooking and Music.”

At first thought, Aster seemed to be incredible… But Bruno supposed not!

Then Aster stared at the paper further and paused to think about his next remark. It didn’t take much time, somehow. “You know who would be getting the highest marks, though?” he prompted. After some exchanging stares, he blurted, “Alex!”

And as he said his name, Alex arrived with the most swagger that he /9 ever had. His white shoes clapped on his way through the cheap floor. It announced his name as he approached his friends, wearing a wide grin and holding up his report card so proudly, it could’ve been his topper trophy.

“Hello folks.” His shining grin rubbed off on his peers. “Look at what I’ve got.” As if that silky voice didn’t rub salt on the wound…

He then raised his paper happily, giving it to Bruno who read it silently with Aster and Blossom.

“Of course. The madman does it once again,” Aster sighed.

As expected, Alex got straight A’s. That is what he’s famous for, after all. Being a straight A student. Still, the three hated to watch that expression grow.

“No need to rub that in, bozo,” added Aster sharply.

“Sorry, not sorry,” Alex chortled.

Bruno breathed like a mother after controlling her child. “You know what, it’s still amazing that we passed,” /10 he went on to comment.

“Yes. It *is* extraordinary,” stated Alex.

Aster blew a stray strand of his hair and huffed a bit more. That's when they began trotting through the long bland walls made of painted concrete.

They took their sweet time looking through how the school turned out after all this time. It didn't change much, but the atmosphere certainly was different from how it was from the first semester.

The lockers were dressed in girly stickers. The dull lights now half-lit for three-fourths of them, instead of the quarter. It added into the eerie ambience which adds into the school's legends about its involvement with the supernatural. Of course, that was never confirmed to be true, but people like to believe that.

What didn't add into it were the chattering students. At this point, everyone had found their tribe, although most already did before Bruno even joined the school. The four stood out since they became known for solving mysteries.

While Bruno watched the students laughing or crying over their grades, he noticed how close they were. It was like it was for him. Before he met his current friends, he had heaps of them before in his old school. Now they're gone from his life, even if he sees them everyday in other classes. Bridges were burnt and he felt ached on the inside.

From that moment, he looked at his new friends, and he began to ponder if what he has now is better than before. /11 Better than what's familiar. Just gazing at them reminded him of every painful memory he had. How he broke up with those friends recently, and the deadliest memory was him being called out by his ex, Claire. He recalled that day like it was a war he walked away from.

Her scowl that flickered in his brain once belonged to a girl who had a joyous smile. A girl that's now attached to tearful memories.

“Bruno…” Alex whispered. But before anything else was said, the bell rang and caused a small earthquake.

“Come on. It’s class time,” declared Bruno. He sluggishly dragged his way to the classroom, while he left his friends awkwardly alone in the corridor, all the other students swam past them.

In Class 2, it was one of Bruno’s favorite subjects: History! Apparently, there was supposed to be English, but Garcia, the homeroom and said subject’s teacher, was still out in France. This is why her daughter, Carly, who was also a member of the class, was absent, as well as /15 the head coach, Jeffery, the husband of Garcia.

The teacher, Charles Turner, an archeologist, sprang to class in his adventurous manner.

“Good morning, children!” he greeted brashly.

Everyone cheered. “Good morning, Mr. Turner!”

“Now, as you may have heard from gossip, your lovely teacher is out on a vacation to Europe, so I’m going to take over her class for the week!” Charles announced.

Bruno grinned as his eyes met the teacher. The man soon turned to the whiteboard to write the topic of the day’s class.

“And since it is such a special day, let’s discuss something special to you!” he added, his enthusiasm oozing.

The chalkboard finally had something to say. “What is the history of your school?” /16

Chapter 2

The Alumnus

The class gasped in unison, then chattered away like Charles wasn't there.

"That's right, students!" Turner said. "But it's not the real history. You see, I've heard that you're all doing this whole role and class war thing… So why don't you explain it to me? Tell me how it all started."

There was more talking. All the volume blasted in Bruno's ears.

"You don't need to stand up," Turner cleared up.

That prompted someone to speak.

"It started back in the second grade," a student, Max, started.

He went on about the class system. It is a system where all the classes are divided like countries. And like countries, there are wars and conflicts happening. Stereotypes formed and any relationships between classes /17 are frowned upon.

While it started as a fun playground game made by a Class 4 student, after the other classes participated, things turned bloody. But it was, and still is, fun roleplaying like this.

"Hey, how about smaller stories?" Turner prompted.

"There *was* a leader before Alex," added Spencer. His voice was from the far left back, yet it couldn't be crisper. "Her name was Zina."

Alex choked suddenly. "She was my…" He stopped himself before replacing one word with another. "Friend." He gazed at his wooden table. "She was a respected and noble leader. She might've not been as book-smarts as me, but she knew how to lead."

Turner nodded and slightly hummed. "I've heard of her. I even saw her on the first day I worked here," he told them. /18 "What exactly happened to her? Did she *really* get killed? If she was, who killed her?"

His answer was a dreadful silence.

Curiosity obscured his thoughts like a mist in the morning, yet he kept quiet in the raging stillness. However, it was clear that even the students didn't know any better. So he opened his mouth.

"Wow!" he interjected, beginning to sweat. "Okay…"

"Some people said that it happened at school, but there were no murders here. It was all a rumor, just like everything else people say about us," Max told him out of the blue.

After some quiet minutes of everyone exchanging looks, they returned their eyes to their teacher.

"There *was* someone else involved in her murder though," Mandy, a girl sitting across Bruno, stated. /19

That made Turner's eyebrow raise. His interesting expression rubbed on everyone in such a strange way. It was uneasy. He even kept his silence.

"Well, he isn't her murderer, but—"

"He predicted her death!" Alex snapped, stopping Maverick, Mandy's partner who was continuing her sentence.

Turner approached the irritated Alex in a fit of eagerness. "Who?"

The boy had a shallow breath. "Troy Voyant," he grimly said.

The air suddenly grew tighter and tense. Fearful. But while Bruno was stunned, nobody else was. They all seemed calm in that knowledge, even Casper, the newest student before Bruno. Turner seemed even more wretched than he was earlier.

"*Voyant*?" Turner shrieked. "Like Thomas Voyant, *the* psychic? Is Troy his son!?"

Indeed. Troy's father, Thomas, is New York City's most famous psychic because he /20 is the wisest one. However, the Voyants are all psychics. What makes Thomas so much more special than them is how he

tried to make a name for himself by being nomadic across America. Really, it was Troy's uncle taking care of him. But his home was always in Manhattan.

"Yeah," Alex affirmed.

The teacher shook his head before another student spoke. "Don't worry, the kid didn't kill her. Just foresaw it." It was from Maverick again.

"I remember him," Turner recalled longingly.

Bruno blinked. He felt stupid for asking, but he had to go on anyways. "Who's Troy?"

Now the class turned to see the newcomer, who was asking questions as usual. Alex was the quickest to answer. His blazing hazel eyes met Bruno's low brown ones.

"Troy was a member of this class from /21 the beginning till sixth grade. He was a mangy psychic…" he started, then inhaled to stop himself from spilling harsh words.

"A psychic he was!" Turner interrupted what Alex might say. "I remember when he predicted that my wife was going to cheat on me and that our son will find a Serbian girl and move there. It all happened."

While the anecdote stifled everyone's motion, it was one of many tales about the boy. It was just a long prophecy compared to the others' vague ones.

Bruno would soon listen to everyone else sharing their personal experiences. He felt quite lucky for joining late for the first time.

Troy had predicted anything and everything, from mundane happenings in a day to life-changing moments that broke or fixed someone. It certainly was fascinating to hear.

Finally, they stopped their recollection of Troy. Bruno had finally gotten the point. /22

“Where is Troy now?” Turner asked.

Everyone shuddered. “Expulsed,” Sarah said grimly.

Alex swiftly shook his head. “No. He just left the school… Maybe he *did* kill Zina. Nobody knows.”

If Alex doesn’t know something, then nobody does and that means the whole situation has something off going on… And off it was.

Nevertheless, Troy was gone and Bruno may never meet him… Though to him, *may* is just a false term!

“I want to see him,” Bruno whispered to Alex who gasped. “Why?!” he wailed.

“I like to meet the alumni here. You saw how I was in the school dance,” Bruno pointed out. He was referring to how he met a bunch of them at the recent party the school held where they all were specially invited.

“He is bad news, Bruno. He literally brings them!” warned Alex. /23

That made the boy in blue scoff. “Nobody’s *that* bad.”

As soon as Bruno spouted that, Alex stared at him like a disapproving parent. “Excuse me? He predicted my best friend’s death!”

Bruno coughed. He wished he could say that murmurs of the classroom drowned out his friend’s voice but alas, it didn’t. Even Turner didn’t seem so loud.

“Sure. I know you won’t act like this if *I* die,” he quietly snarled.

Alex gasped deeply. “I will!”

“Am I not like Zina?” Bruno asked, his tone suddenly turned ghastly.

There was a grimace worn on Alex’s face. It was so blatant, it could’ve burnt Bruno.

The aggression slowed down after Turner retorted, “Well… This has been fun.”

Soon enough, he moved on to another topic; one about the legitimate history /24 of the school. However, Bruno didn’t listen at all. He could only think about Troy now, and Zina to some extent. Everything else was white noise.

It was creepy but Bruno did genuinely want to see Troy. Despite listening to a lot of stories about him already, he was thirsting for more. /25

Chapter 3

Confessions

After the ring of the school bell, at the end of the harrowing day, Bruno went out into the bright rays of the orange setting sun with his friends. The marble floor was almost like ice.

When Bruno and Blossom found their bus and hopped on their usual seats, they noticed how empty it was. It's because there is the daily hangout at school. Students can spend time there after hours with their friends, or more commonly, stay for clubs. So the pair were practically alone together.

As the vehicle moved along, so did the racing thoughts of Bruno. His heart was drumming, bolting like the bus. Staring out the window into the views of New York City's fabulous skyline, he can't help but have a nagging feeling, an obligation to talk about Troy to his good friend. Would she react the same way as Alex? He didn't know and didn't seem to care. /26

"Hey, Bruno!" Blossom called, waking Bruno out of his trance, "So, Mr. Biology just told me that he's planning to hold his test literally after tomorrow. It's insane!"

He was about to start asking her but held himself. "Yeah, he told my class as well. But you know Mr. McRyan; He's weird."

His awkward and avoidant tone did alert Blossom. She extended her arm to him. "Aye, what's the matter?"

"Just worried about the test!" Bruno blurted boomingly.

Blossom's frown turned into an instant grin. "I know!" A small chuckle followed before she witnessed the same magnificence Bruno did.

The urge didn't consume him further though.

“Bloss,” he started. She snapped her head at him, fully interested. “Can I ask you and Aster something?”

“Asty isn’t here,” Blossom told him, stopping him. /27

“At school,” Bruno added,” tomorrow.”

Blossom squirmed after nodding, her whimpering growing clear. It’s obvious she feared what might commence. So much so that she just turned back to hug her pink trolley bag in silence.

The night passed. School opened again. During the entire trip there, Bruno and Blossom stayed quiet, both trying not to tremble. Finally, they reach the peculiar school, shrouded in its usual mystique.

As everyone passed them through the front door, Bruno noticed someone he couldn’t ignore: Aster. Even Blossom, who seemed to have been caught up in something in her own world, spotted him.

“Hey guys! What’s up?” Aster’s informal greeting didn’t light up his friends though. “Guys? What’s going on?”

Aster’s desperate voice prompted Bruno to start speaking, though it was like he was carrying on from a statement. “I, uh… Since yesterday, I wanted to ask you two something,” he said. /28

Aster and Blossom silently gazed at him. The shade-dappled lockers disappeared from Bruno’s view as he could only focus on them and nobody else. There weren’t any words, yet Bruno could sense that there were.

“Yesterday, me and my classmates were talking about Troy…”

As soon as that name was dropped, the pair were stunned. Broken. Their eyes swelled. While that irked Bruno at first, he did continue. “So, I just thought to ask you…”

The fury burnt like fire in the teens' eyes. "Troy?!" Aster yelped. The voice haunted Bruno.

"He is the one who predicted Hemlock's death!" he added.

His blue friend got stumped. "Who's Hemlock?"

Blossom shuddered then teared up, not even moving an inch, her mouth just staying still. /29

"Hemlock is our old friend. He was quite like you. Normal, naïve and nice. He died during gym class though. We believe that he got deadly corrupted," Aster explained, his voice growing more brittle the more words were being blurted. Suddenly, a faint whisper could be heard. "I'm sorry for not protecting you, Hemlock."

Bruno could hear that as clear as day, however, he pretended to ignore it in favor of the death's connection with Troy. He may not be good at math, but he can two and two together that Troy predicted Hemlock's death and now his friends are furious. It'd be predictable if that was truly the case here.

"Troy is an embarrassment to your class," Aster stated, "Why were you even talking about him?"

Bruno snapped back, "We were talking about the history of the school and Troy was a topic that just… Was brought up!" /30

He kept glancing to search for any student who might be watching them, but that person doesn't exist. A sigh followed. "But I shouldn't have asked, right?"

"It's ok. You're curious and that's your nature," assured Blossom.

Yet Bruno didn't seem to understand that. Nonetheless, Aster carried on with his sharp words. "If you're thinking about contacting him: Don't. You'll regret it when he foresees your death, or something disastrous like that," he warned. That made the ordinary boy reconsider,

as if Alex hadn't done that job already. Still, his heart was dictating what he would do next.

Suddenly, the bell rang, marking the end of the divisive conversation. It has left Bruno at a loss for words. The same appeared to be said for his friends as they set off for their classes, vanishing in the crowds of their classmates. They didn't spew a word. /31

So Bruno trotted to his own classroom, breathing in the familiar air as if he had just entered home. He spotted his classmates, which most have come. They were relaxing and chatting. As he found his seat, he also saw Alex, fretting over papers.

"Alex?" Bruno spluttered.

"Sorry. Came early, then Dunkel gave me all of this paperwork because *apparently* no homeroom teacher exists!" Alex frantically answered while scribbling his piece of graphite. His fingers raced through the sheets. In the confidential teacher's notebook, he swiftly marked Bruno as present. Dunkel, the principal, had truly given him way more work than he can chew.

"It's… Fine," Bruno replied slowly.

His heart dropped too, as he wished he could help. The authority was there too, as he was the vice leader, or class prince as they call him. Yet he felt powerless at the same time. The job was handed by the principal himself after all. /32

Soon enough, Bruno could hear murmurs ringing out of his classmates about Troy. It appears as if the topic didn't die yet.

There was a sinking dumbbell inside of him. A slight voice from his brain begging him to find Troy, but at the same time, he knew of any dire consequences. The nagging peers, the dreadful prophecies. Is it worth it?

Alex seemed to have read his thoughts. “Planning to see Troy?” he asked without even looking at his friend. “Sorry, but I doubt it’ll work out.”

“He can be good, I know it. He was young anyways!” Bruno argued.

But the effects of speaking up summed to nothing after Alex scoffed. “Sure. Let me remind you that he told me my closest friend would die! And it happened!”

“Why are you and the others blaming him?” /34

Bruno’s strike back stunned Alex. His thought train shifted its gear somewhere else. He hissed, “Excuse me? Others? You spoke to Aster and Blossom too?!” His head now finally facing his partner fully.

Bruno stammered. “Uh, well, I—”

“They hate Troy even before their good friend died! How do I know? I used to be close to them! And *him*…”

“Hemlock?”

“So you did ask them.”

“But why did they hate Troy before?”

Alex recollected himself after staring at the ground while Bruno’s heart raced. “Troy used to be a bit of a snitch to them. He is why they even split classes,” he explained.

Bruno realized it. Troy told his visions to everyone. He also remembered that Aster and Blossom used to be together in Class 1, but after enough complaints, they got separated into their current classes. What Bruno didn’t know was Troy’s involvement and testimony being the straw that broke the camel’s back. /35

“Well, just heed my word. I am your best friend and leader after all,” grimaced Alex as his eyes turned into slits.

Bruno quietly groaned. Alex didn't even answer his earlier question, clearly dodging it with another topic. The power his friend has over him didn't make him cower in fear either. He didn't care. His grunt quivered away after a moment of clarity in his mind. It was about Troy. How he's the only one to maybe view him in a different light. Perhaps he has to find it out for himself to see if he made the right conclusion in spite of those tales. And he has to do it on his own…

… But how can he do that?

In the break, he began to brainstorm a lot. His mind was clouded so much, he ignored Alex, Aster and Blossom talking over each other. They didn't even notice how Bruno kept a silent gaze to the ground.

Their words were mere muffles. Like they're sucked underwater and Bruno was drowning in his theories. He thought of the ways to contact Troy—like how maybe he should interview him.

During his shower in thoughts, he remembered how he started rumors himself too. It was about Dexter, who is now in Class 3. He regretted what he did. This situation… It reminded him an awful lot of what he did before.

His chatting friends were echoes of how he was feeling. Pitiful. Vengeful. Naïve. What bothered him was also how they ignored his anxiety. Well, only until they suddenly stopped and stared at their frozen friend.

"Bruno?" Blossom whimpered.

Then he realized—he didn't have to do this alone. While his friends may not directly help, other peers can… But asking his /36 confidants would be worth a shot, right?

"I know this is crazy but…"

He choked himself as he caught a group briefly spying on them. They were certain members of Class 1, namely the girls, one of them being Claire, Bruno's ex. Once they swung their heads away though, Bruno lifted himself to speak again.

"I want to… See Troy."

Before his friends could snark with anything, Bruno snapped back. "I know what you're thinking! Look, I just want to see things in a different perspective." He also can't deny that he had other ulterior motives too, yet his pride held him back from admitting that reason.

So they paused in stillness. Alex was the one who started animating. "Well, we won't help," he sharply declared.

"But—"

"Silence!" Alex roared. His striking word stunned Bruno while the others dwindled in courage. "This time, I'm not meddling with anything! Not with you!" His voice then turned mournful. "I'm not doing /37 anything with him." Searing pain could be heard in every letter.

The bell rang. They had to go. The first person to escape to class was Alex, with his yellow beanie almost falling out of his rage.

"Blossom?" Bruno called once Blossom started walking away, his eyes widened, the light gleamed in his pupils like a star. Her only answer was a slight head turn, following by charging to her class after rough jogs. All that could be seen from her was her back.

Aster was about to join her on his return to his rightful room, but Bruno had enough. He clenched his lips. Jittered in the notion that nobody would help. Finally, he bursted, rushing to the short boy.

"Aster!" he bellowed.

Ticked off, Aster turns around to fully view his desperate friend approaching him, an inch away from his foot. Blossom had already gone

too far for Aster to follow, but he didn't mind. All he could mind now was the boy in blue.

"What?" barked Aster. /38

"Can you—"

"Help with Troy? No."

But Bruno knew Aster's greatest weakness. He really thought he was stupid for not exploiting one for Alex and Blossom.

"Fine. Guess you don't want fifty bucks then."

Aster's mouth gaped. "M-m-money?" he stammered.

"Come on. What's your decision?"

The boy stood still, holding his gaze at the green papers, then at Bruno. "Fine," he reluctant agreed, "I'll help."

With that, Bruno perked up in joy. But that's also when he realizes that the classes are about to start. So he leaves with a dashing grin and heads off to Class 2, Aster also separating from him. /39

Chapter 4

Finding Troy

The school day turned to dusk as everyone had to leave. That includes Bruno and his friends. Watching as some enter buses while other skipping with their parents, the normal kid avoided both. Blossom left to their bus, not even realizing he wasn't following her. Alex just snorted and left off, possibly knowing of his friend's motive. His father, a staff member, beckoned him to their car and left.

That leaves Aster as the lone pal. He was about to trek to the way to his parent's car off in the road until…

"Wait!" Bruno yelped.

Aster froze and turned back, showing off his sharp, black hair blowing in the wind.

"I didn't have the time to tell you this, but I'm planning to investigate from today," the blue boy stated as he approached his friend. /40

That caused Aster's face to droop. His eyes were lazier than ever. A groan could be heard. "No kidding," he mumbled.

As Bruno tried not to fade his expression from excitement to disappointment, he chuckled with his grin open. "Sorry."

Aster silently murmured. "For the money." Then his stance turned brash, his head held high to meet his friend's eye. "Look, my mom is here too. I'm not sure how I can leave to go on your…" He dripped himself then grunted. "Stupid schemes!"

“Come on!” Bruno whined. At this point, he looked like an ex begging for their ‘one and only’ to date them again. “I can’t do it without you!”

Aster hissed, “Yeesh, ok! Didn’t say I wasn’t going to help.” Aster, his face relaxed as his pupils searched if anyone was watching. Finally, he signaled Bruno to come with his hands. So, he obliged. /41

They trotted past the now empty entrance of the school, out of the gate where the cars parked. They were approaching Aster’s car far in the streets. It was white, small and a common model of a popular car.

Aster, upon reaching it, stared at Bruno with a shocked shine in his eyes. “Just stay here,” he sharply ordered.

Then he opened the door, not to come in, but to show off that he brought his friend. His mother noticed, turning her head to witness him with Bruno. Her eyes blazed in instant fury.

“Hi, mother,” Aster greeted grimly.

“Aye! What is going on?!” she snarled, her accent blatantly Asian. It was obvious that she’s Filipino, which was a given since her son is also known to be the same nationality too.

That was also when Aster showed off how he truly sounds, for he can share her accent. “My friend, Bruno, would like to—”

Suddenly, his mother started to roar in Tagalog. Clearly, she was swearing, but Bruno really only knew English and Spanish. /42 Aster argued back in the same language. All sounding alien, yet Bruno could still feel the striking fear. It was haunting. The woman could be bashing him for all he knows.

Finally, it turned English, with Aster’s words. “I don’t care, mother! I am going with him.”

“You have always been a stupid boy!”

Aster's heart flared. He snarled slowly, "Linda, how dare you!"

Bruno gasped. A child calling their mother by their name… That's *something* all right. Even the lady squeaked out a breath.

"Watch your word, boy!" Linda snapped.

Bruno felt the heat of the moment like he's a part of it. Now he could finally see her as Aster backed away from the passenger seat. She had the same bored eyes as her son.

Brown hair that could almost be black stretched along her body. Long, straight, but not reaching the bottom of her chair. She also wore a hat that was large and nearly covered her eyes. A raven fedora with scarlet roses. Beneath was a warm-colored /43 shirt divided in two, reaching her neck. Jewelry surrounded it, but low-quality. It was expected. The Jonquils, Aster's family, are fairly poor.

"Sorry…" Aster huffed, "Not sorry!"

Linda growled.

Bruno, now knowing how fire the situation is, decided to take action by slightly bending forward to Aster's shoulder.

"Aster—"

Before he could continue, Linda shook them by forcing her hips to grasp the car's doorknob, then pulled it to deal it with a following lock. All while she was trapped in her seatbelt. Immediately after, she drives away, only leaving a trail of smoke that dies away and tire tracks to Harlem, where Aster lives.

That left the two teenagers paralyzed. Linda just left her son stranded! /44

"Look at that—Sherlock has stranded his Watson away from Home," Aster snorted.

“You… Idiot!” Bruno groaned, “You should’ve let me speak. Now look at what you’ve done!”

Aster started to twitch. “Me?! Dude, she can’t even speak English well!”

“You dirty rat.”

“You’re the idiot! Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?!”

“I thought this idea would work out!”

“Guess what? It didn’t.”

After the brief argument, Bruno settled his mind down and breathed deeply. His state of mind turned normal. He and Aster stared at each other, both at a standstill. “Sorry. I don’t know what got over me,” Aster quietly apologized. It did feel like they had returned to being enemies for a second.

Then they gazed at the setting sky, fading into the dark. What a relaxing feeling it was. The stars /45 joined in together one by one, singing a quiet choir ringing in the boy’s ears in the form of wind. They realized that they had to walk their way through the streets.

“Come on,” Bruno beckoned with his hand. They went along, following the solid gray roadside, awkward over what happened. Their feet glued to the concrete.

Memories waved them, hitting them in the undertow. Bruno’s mind clouded by Troy, while he can tell something haunted Aster. The former tried to look at the other, but he didn’t even reciprocate. Staring at the ground blankly.

“Sorry,” Bruno whispered, spilling regret.

“It’s fine,” Aster’s sour voice spat. It seemed like he was lying. “We always do stupid things like this together. Let’s just hope that finding Troy isn’t one of them.”

Bruno grinned, then turned down.

“Right. And I want you and the others because… I thought you’d know where he is.” /46

“Are you serious?” Aster snorted. “He went missing years ago!”

Bruno scoffed. “How can a kid go missing? Can we at least ask his parents?”

His friend gazed around before sighing. “Fine,” he hesitantly gaped. “His dad is *the* Voyant—Thomas Voyant. Everyone in Manhattan knows where he’s living, so follow me.”

And so they went. Trekking past jittering trees, critters snoring and views of the skyline jut through, now brightly lit due to the radiance of the night.

Finally, they reach the place. It was a makeshift house, it seemed like. Rustic, wooden. A chimney that could reach the clouds could be seen. Balconies littered near windows. Topping it off was the air of mystique emanating. /47

Reluctant, Bruno pushed himself to ring the weak doorbell. Silence came in like an old friend. He and Aster stood awkwardly, tapping their feet as they expected a person to appear. Whistles and whines from the house didn’t make the atmosphere better.

Right when Bruno went to press the doorbell again, the door creaked open at once. It was a loud wail. Even the wood didn’t want to be here.

What was revealed was a rangy, towering middle-aged man. His hair was his shadow, leaning and choppy down to his neck in the back. His throbbing eyes had a blazing sensation when met. The coffee-colored sweater he wore was almost shredded.

The man padded forward. “Hello, children,” he hissed, which was lighting.

Aster was cowering, bending his legs to seem smaller than he already is. Bruno was the opposite though. “Hello!” he happily greeted. /48

“What do you want?” the man demanded to know.

“Mr. Thomas Voyant, we’re here to—”

“Ask about my son?”

The prediction shook Aster even if he knew the Voyants were psychics.

“I know you want to look for him. And I suppose you believe I have the answer as to where he is?” Thomas questioned, as if he was talking down on preschoolers. His tone was as menacing as Bruno expected.

After an imposing heave of his head, Thomas snapped, “Well, I don’t!”

Aster broke from his worried trance and began animating. “Excuse me? You don’t know where your *son* is?!”

“He ran away from home after he had his expulsion… Or after he left the school in some way,” the psychic briefly explained, getting perplexed while speaking. Then he could very well see the agitation in the teens’ faces. He took a breath before speaking. /49

“Ok, ok. Don’t think I’m all useless. Troy gave me this note,” Thomas assured. At once, he gave them a crumbled square sheet of paper. The moment it opened, they could find a bunch of words written poorly. It was a note of where Troy went…

“I tried to change his mind and bring him home, but he didn’t want to. He said that this place isn’t his home anymore. He said he was bullied too much at school,” Thomas added further, seasons of grief flashing through his eyes, even if he didn’t want to show it.

Aster’s mouth widened. Perhaps he and his peers did go too far. They peeked into the paper again, now beginning to note in their heads

the words “Going to *Nettleburg* if you need to me.” It was a neighborhood not too far from Bruno’s.

“We’re going to him,” Bruno boldly declared.

Thomas snarled. “If his father can’t change his mind, who can?”

“I can,” Bruno replied, powered by his vigor. His chest now forward and confident. “Trust me. If anyone in this city can change his mind, it’s me.” /50

But even Aster didn’t seem so convinced, and he was a victim of Bruno’s alluring persuasion. His eyes flickered to the ground.

“Whatever you say. Just beware.” The man’s voice turned more supernatural. Like he was being possessed by some outer being. The pitch went down. “I can see infinite paths into the future, and if you do manage to return Troy… You’ll regret it once the inevitable happens, and especially in a few days’ time. Please be vary, young ones.”

Bruno quivered, shrouded in shock. “What do you mean? The inevitable? Like, when we die?”

Aster sparked up suddenly. “Hey! Speak up, wisecrack!”

But as soon as Aster started demanding, the door shut close. Didn’t even look like Thomas closed it with his hands, instead with his third eye. It was haunting.

Now all that was left was the door. Fearsome as it was. /51

Chapter 5

The Return

Bruno had a desperate look at Aster. One that begged for a comment about the prediction, or some theory. It was at that moment he started to regret the mission.

Aster didn't answer his silent friend's inner plea, however. It was just a searing grimace that burnt his friend's eyes. No glowing warmth, just a sickening, solid, cold expression.

"Look at that," he rasped. "Changed your mind yet?"

Bruno batted his head. "No!" He was still firm. "The prophecy, or whatever that was, will come true if we bring him to school."

"Tom didn't specify that," argued Aster.

"Well, it doesn't matter. I'm finding Troy tomorrow. And only because it's getting late." Bruno was right. The skies have gotten darker and layered the city with its gray clouds. /52

At a nod, one more hesitant from Aster, the two jumped from the stairs and trotted away separately to opposite roads.

The next day comes with a sweet sunrise. Rising to see anyone getting to school, and everyone seemingly did. The halls were crowded, filled with chatting students when Bruno and Blossom came.

"Wonder what's going on today to cause all the third and fourth graders to come," Blossom pondered.

Bruno gasped. "Of course! The field trip!"

Blossom screamed. "Field trip?! On the second day!?"

"My brother got ready for one earlier in the morning and he's in the third grade," the boy in blue explained.

Blossom's face was filled with pure jealousy. Only if she could turn back time. There would be field trip galore!

Aster was finally seen. He was just /53 resting his bent leg on his locker, decorated with gothic black stickers. His shady, spiky locks still nearly covering both of his purplish-black eyes. His face stuck with no emotion.

A flash of thought waved through Bruno, remembering what happened the night prior. His so-called friend was, to him, insufferable at the moment. Not even believing in him. Yet Bruno still had to pay a debt: a debt of money. Hatred really pried him to be his frustrated self.

"Morning Asty!" Blossom grinned as soon as they approached him.

Flicking his stray strands covering his right eye, Aster gave a stare at his best friend. "Hello," he hissed, directed to Bruno.

Blossom paused, then motioned. "Wow. Uhm… Is it true that you and Bruno Boy here went to see Troy?"

"We tried to, but we only saw his father, who just told us where he could be," Aster stated angrily. /54

"So you're really going through with this, huh? Good luck then," Blossom grimly said. The gloom in her voice also echoed on her head.

Bruno swallowed while Aster spat, "Gee. That's some great encouragement right there."

Then one record in their minds spun. It was about Alex… And Class 2. What will they think of this?

"Oh… I might get exiled if they know. Gosh! Sent away like Troy and—"

As Bruno started a tornado of his rumination, a certain voice drummed his head. "I'm here." It was silky, but high pitched weirdly enough.

When Bruno turned his head to see who invaded his ear, it was a boy beaming with a cape with flaming hair. While he was lost, Aster and Blossom's mouths were shut, their eyes super wide.

A chuckle came. "Looking for me in Manhattan? Now that's finding a needle in a haystack! Sort of."

Finally, Bruno puzzled the riddle. The boy in front of him—it's Troy!

There he was in all his legendary glory, or infamous glory. Fiery, looming and enigmatic.

"Troy!" they called together, then bit their tongues as they realize others could be watching. Bruno stopped forward. "It's really you. How did you sneak in?"

Troy winked. "Magic," he joked. Then, after clearing his throat, he started, "Really, I was here all along, since you came at least. Security isn't good here and while I could've broken into the place in the middle of the night, I actually just teleported."

Bruno gave a perplexed glance to his friends, who didn't seem to be less stumped. His gaze returned to the seer. "I thought you were a psychic."

"Psychics are just magicians that specialize in future fight, like how your classmate, Renard, specializes in shapeshifting!"

Troy seemed so relaxed, it was strange. Nobody was noticing him. Perhaps the crowd is caught up with conversations all too much.

"Don't worry," Troy assured once Bruno dropped a frown. "I only appear once in a while… Uh, since you came." Looks like the last point was so important, he had to reiterate it.

"Nobody has caught you?" Bruno muttered.

"Yet!" exclaimed the seer. "Also, what's up with your amigos?"

The boy gestured to Aster and Blossom. When Bruno noticed, he realized what he meant. They were as still as bricks. Their pupils fixed on Troy, their mouths were wide open. Bruno could feel their subtle tremors.

"You…" Aster breathed, "You…!"

Before Aster could take any action, Troy held his hand, then chanted. "Tropelet, tropelet, troplet." At once, there was a flicker in the light and a cracking sound. Shadows disappeared as /57 they did. What remained was the memory of the moment. With how abrupt yet silent it was, Blossom was stunned.

"Aster!" she suddenly cried.

"Where did they go?" Bruno asked quickly.

Their eyes paced around, but all they saw were the labyrinth of lockers and packs of students bundled together.

"No, Aster!" bellowed Blossom further, sounding like she just witnessed Aster's death. Though for all they knew, that was a possibility. Tears would've flown out if It wasn't for her rage keeping it in. "That Troy!" she spat. The fling of her head was of a click. Her skull locked in. "Bruno…" There was a dreary note as she stared at him.

Bruno flinched. "Don't blame me!" His hiss could've been harsher. "I mean… I was…" The reflection smacked him. "A bit too curious." A dagger stabbed him. What a realization… /58

Suddenly, Troy returned once more, tricking the light as he reappeared.

"Hello," he greeted as if nothing happened.

"Where is Aster!?" Blossom demanded. Her voice grew more tough.

"I took him home. A path in my visions tell me he'll be better off if he stays there," explained Troy calmly. "Trust me, I'm saving him."

Blossom was about to snarl back before the seer faintly chanted again and left with another crack. At that point, the girl was at a loss for words as she was clouded in her temper. It was Bruno who started talking.

"I wonder what he means," Bruno whispered.

Blossom retorted, "Probably something to do with Class 4 if he's getting only Aster back home." Her head swiveled down. "I bet he also just wants to avoid getting his guts beaten by Aster."

Bruno can't deny that he'd do the /59 same back when the foreigner was bullying him.

Finally, the bell sang like everyday, except there was no Aster—or even Alex as they began to notice—and a prophecy about a rival class lingering in their heads.

As soon as Bruno reached Class 2, he saw Alex chaotically jotting down something.

The curiosity piqued Bruno. He went towards him and took his usual seat. Leaning forward, he stared at the writing. "Alex?" he prompted.

Quickly, Alex lifted his head to see his friend, breaking apart from the glue of his table. "Morning," he panted. Was he running a marathon or what?

"What have you got today?" Bruno asked as if he was patiently waiting to hear national news.

"Two letters for the Class 4 leader /60 *and* vice leader," he answered haphazardly, referring to Michael and Brody respectively.

"What happened?"

Alex sighed as he paused then dropped his frantic pen. "The teachers saw Brody and Aaron working together to break out of school, and possibly conspired with the rest of the class as well. Now Principal

Dunkel went to punish everyone… With no mercy at all." His head padded to the papers. "Now, as the leader of the class, I have the duty to support them during this hard time… And that includes doing this."

Bruno blinked. "What was the punishment?"

The grim tone of his voice made Alex brood more. "No getting out of class other than getting home or they were called for anything. Teachers are forced to make lessons harder, whatever that means. All they could do out is clean the grounds too… And the cafeteria." Alex cringed at the last punishment.

There was no expected whimper, however. Just shock. Bruno didn't only expect something was up with Class 4, but also, he felt like the school does hold much more evil punishments. "How… Long will this last?"

/61 "Oh, it's only today," Alex bluntly stated. "I mean, I assume so. Not all Class 4 students know of this, like Aster, so I couldn't get clearer information other than second-hand stuff from Ryder and Peppermint." Those last two names were of the other leaders, who somehow caught wind of this news before Class 2's king.

But the answer was enough to send Bruno's mind into a bottomless frenzy as he thinks about what Troy said—Aster really dodged a bullet, even if it was a miniscule one!

Alex noticed his frozen friend. "Bruno?"

"T-Troy… He was right…!"

Straight after, he covered his mouth.

"Troy?!" Alex yelped, trying not to make himself louder by lowering his voice. "Aster told me yesterday at lunch that you're going through with it."

Bruno trembled. "Y-you know?"

"I do. And I said I didn't want to meddle anymore, and I stand by that, but I'm /62 worried for you too. Troy means anarchy."

Bruno swallowed. “He… He was at school.”

“Excuse me?” Alex mumbled.

Finally, he plucked up the courage to speak away from his cowardice. “Troy appeared. I think he can teleport in.”

Anxiety crept up on him before he could pour out his words. “Alex… Aster was taken back home by him! He thinks something with his class is going to happen.”

Alex’s former content expression turned deathly. His eyes turned hollow. “This could be it… Class 4’s punishment…!” His dim voice turned blazing. “It’s his fault!”

The face on Bruno was of horror, then rage. “Are you serious? He just predicted it!”

But Alex didn’t seem so convinced. He just had his hazed irises piercing his partner. “Troy was black-hearted, Bruno. You still don’t understand! Didn’t he basically force Aster back home /63 without his consent? Or did Aster allow it?”

Bruno’s eyes paced around, then landed at his leader. “No. I doubt so,” he hesitantly answered. While he wished he could lie, it wasn’t possible for his heart. It was too big for Alex.

Alex grumbled. Following it was Turner raising his head from his pile of books. “Ok students! Class is in session!” he declared, followed by the harsh blow of an airhorn, trembling everyone suddenly.

The look Alex gave to his friend burnt him. Quite a threatening glare. Once Turner started to lace the board of his chalk, that was all Alex would begin to see. Bruno’s mind, meanwhile, was stuck on Troy. He decided that he had to do something… But what? /64

Chapter 6

Jonquils

After the hefty day, Bruno was the first to escape the school. Dashing into the us. Blossom wasn't even there for some reason, which makes his heart pound.

For a moment, he thought Blossom had gone off to sit with somebody else… Someone better for her.

But, with the mind cleared of clarity, he saw Blossom trotting with her aunt. They must've planned a visit later that evening. Nonetheless, it was relieving to see.

Once he arrived home, he slammed the door open in a dying hurry. Bruno saw his parents relaxing and huddling together while watching TV. His brother wasn't seen at all.

"Mom, dad—"

His father interrupted him. "Ah, Bruno! There you are! Your dinner's in the /65 kitchen. It's a little cold." When the dad turned full back to see his son, he could tell Bruno was a bit disoriented. "I'll prepare it for you," he awkwardly declared.

And so he went off to the kitchen after springing from the sofa, leaving his wife alone. As he reached the room, he gripped the fridge door and flung it open to pull out some old pasta that was trapped in a tinfoil wrapped plate.

He showed it off to Bruno, holding it up. "Your favorite!"

No response though.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

Bruno huffed a bit, silently to himself. His face was still tense. Tired of everything, he didn't want to beat around the bush.

"Do you know who Thomas Voyant is?" he asked. /66

His dad blinked. "Yeah. He's one of the most famous psychics in America! He lives here."

"Well, his son went to my school for a while… Until he was blamed for the death of some students," Bruno explained, "I think he only was only predicting things, but everyone hates him for what he did, so now, I want to clear his name."

His father had a wide smile, almost tearing up out of pride. "Aww… Look at you. You're turning into me!" After a wipe of the water, Bruno said, "I want you to help. Can you drive me to…" He paused, thinking about where to go. Whose place should he go to…? "A friend's house. I'll tell you the address."

His dad nodded. "I'll help, but before that, you need to eat." The bowl of frozen pasta was now tossed through the surface of the table between Bruno and his father. "Right," Bruno groaned.

"Oh, and get ready for errands." /67

"Errands?" Bruno squawked.

His father chuckled. "That's why I'm fine with driving you around… Other than the mystery."

That made Bruno moan more! He almost wanted to faint. The errands in question definitely involved some shopping, and that isn't usually a good time.

After some munching on decent pasta, Bruno marched into the garage with his dad, who wore a fancy sky blue and white button coat. Beneath him were dark gray jeans that topped the look off.

The lights turned on with the flick of a switch from the father, revealing the average white car they recently bought. Bruno remembered how reliable the old one was. It has been there since he was born. Then it had to be sold away for a better, newer car, even if it's bland. /68

"I know it's still weird," his dad said, as if he read his son's mind, "but this new car will be awesome!"

Bruno nodded. The memories linked with it still lingered in his brain though.

Still, they continue to hop in the front seats. Buckling their seatbelts and pumping themselves up with some sick music from the radio, they were raring to go on this daring adventure until…

"Wait," the father paused. He tilted his head down and gasped. "Oh, my shoes!" He turned red as he realized that it was a tight, super yellow sneaker—it was for his wife! That made Bruno chuckle.

When he returned, the pedals started the car, encouraging it to run, and it did!

Vigorously passing through the hardy roads, lined-up greenery plastered on the roadsides, the boulevard seemed longer than Bruno had imagined. The bright /69 sights of the magnificent Manhattan night sky made up for it though. The shine of the sky, the charm of the neon-lit shops surrounding them immersed Bruno in the trip further.

"So, where are we going, exactly?" the father asked while steering the wheel.

"I don't know the exact address but, I know the street. Barking, Harlem."

"The south. Got it."

They were speaking as though they were detectives affirming information to each other, and Bruno loved it.

After passing through the streets, they finally reached Harlem. Unlike the rest of the city, the suburban areas seemed dimly lit, almost deathly.

"Your friend lives here, huh? Freaky. I can't even count how many times I had to come here for disturbing cases." /70

Bruno did know how the place was in the daytime… Could night be different though? His father continued despite his son's alarming distress.

"I remember a case back in '04," he began, adding in a heavy breath. "There was an Asian immigrant who tried to break into five houses. Only one break-in was successful though. I stopped him in the nick of time, luckily, at least before he could intrude any more houses. But he was sentenced for five months, if I'm not wrong."

Bruno jerked. "Five months?!"

"I know, right?" his dad yelped. "I still remember how he was… He had long back hair, he was short and thin. His clothes were hand-me-downs. When he was locked up, I was checking on him a lot… He was crazy. Greedy. He almost bribed me, but I never bought bribery. Then he tried to guilt trip me about his family. Two sons and daughters each. Even taught his youngest how to play the guitar, a skill he thought would make him successful." /71

For some reason, Bruno could feel his father's warm empathy as he realized everything. Perhaps sympathy for the cruelest was in his blood. However, what was also worn on his eyes was oddly… Nostalgia. A longing for the man it seemed.

"Luis," the father suddenly whispered. Then an even quieter breath came. Bruno could swear he heard "Jonquil", though he was going crazy because his mind was on Aster, a member of the family.

Some stillness came before they reached the house.

"There!" Bruno pointed out.

As the car stopped, the boy got out and proudly strutted to the front door, quickly knocking.

Few minutes passed. Soon enough, the door creaked open to reveal Aline, Aster's sister who Bruno sees in school as the oldest senior. She had her typical fuzzy ponytail, which she whipped at the moment.

"Bruno!" she sang. "I thought I'd /72 see a friend tonight."

Bruno waved and smiled. "Good evening!"

"Well, let me guess: You're here for my little brother?" she asked as if she was in a game show. With a nod as an answer, the girl chuckled. "I thought so."

She cleared her throat, followed by the turn of her head back. She called, "Aster! Your boyfriend's here!"

At once, Aster hissed as he instantly jumped into the door's view. "He's not my BOYFRIEND!"

"You've got a crush on him, I know it!" Aline chortled.

Bruno couldn't tell if Aster was blushing or not. If he was, he couldn't say if he was embarrassment… Or what his sister said was true. Bruno himself turned red out of odd flattery.

The short friend pushed his older sister away with fury. A fake grin came. "Hi," he shakily greeted. /73

"Are you ok? Did Troy—"

"He just took me home. I was going to give him some scars, but he disappeared in the blink of an eye," Aster interjected with a silkier tone than usual.

Bruno swallowed. "He told me something was up with your class. There was. They were punished today because some students tried to sneak out.

Aster gasped, his soul almost leaving. “Another prediction came true.”

Bruno nodded, his body twitched. “I’m just glad you’re ok.” Those words made Aster blush even more and prompted his pupils to move back, then returning it to his friend awkwardly.

“You were really worried?” Aster asked, twirling one of his dark rouge hair strands.

Bruno looked around. “I’m not here to talk more now. My dad’s here,” He pointed to the white car, “and we need to find Troy,” he quickly explained, almost losing his breath. /74

An imposing voice could soon be heard. It was deep and dirty. “Aster?” it called. It was a man. “Are you speaking to your boyfriend?”

“For the last time, Bruno is not my—”

Aster’s notes descended. “Boy… Friend…”

The man towering him was his father. He had long, black hair. Thin as he was short. As filthy as his voice, he wore second-hand clothes unlike his children. Odd.

“Well, at least you seem better than that Chinese girl,” the man snorted.

Bruno knew he was referring to Blossom. It pricked him that Mr. Jonquil mixed her up for being Chinese instead of Japanese. Nonetheless, he kept quiet.

“Hello, Mr. Jonquil. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Bruno bowed.

Aster snickered, blushing again. Then he turned to his dad. Murmurs in Tagalog came out. It was probably about /75 the Troy situation since the name could be heard in English.

“Psychic nonsense!” Mr. Jonquil snapped.

Aster groaned then shouted. “Fine! If you don’t want the money, then I’ll take it only for myself!” He padded away from the front door. “Come on, Bruno.”

His father was still at it, shooting words. “Have fun with your date.” It was blatant that he was just taunting his child. Aster didn’t seem to be taking it though, just continuing on to the car.

Bruno glanced at Mr. Jonquil. With his flashing grin back though, Bruno jumped and ran away to his father’s car.

Bruno tightened his seatbelt before he realized that he was sitting at the back rather than the passenger’s seat. His hat almost fell off. /76

“Aster, your dad is something else,” Bruno breathed.

His friend laughed loudly. Bruno’s father turned back with a concerned expression. “Are you ok?” The boy nodded, but he felt frozen.

“My dad really scared him,” chortled Aster. After the driver shot a searing flare at him though, he stopped chuckling immediately. “Sorry, Mr. Ryan Ray,” he muttered. “That’s your name, right?”

Ryan nodded. Indeed, that *is* his name. It felt a bit strange to hear it randomly though. Afterwards, his eyes darted to his son. “Well, where else are we going to go to? We need to go shopping soon.”

“Shopping?” grunted Aster.

Bruno chuckled awkwardly. “To Nettleburg!” His order came clear as he pointed at the direction of the street, which is south.

Soon enough, the car drifted off to the roads leading there. Lots of swerves and curves, yet the two friends managed to hold on. At a traffic stop, Ryan prompted a conversation.

“So, Aster. How are you, if you don’t mind me asking?” he asked.

Aster gulped. “Fine but, uh, my parents… They’re different than others.”

“How?” Ryan barked. He seemed more apprehensive with Aster, which is peculiar.

“Look, my parents are terrible. My siblings are the opposite though,” Aster blurted quickly.

Bruno could see through the rear-view mirror that Ryan raised an eyebrow. Something is going on. Perhaps he suspected something for the Jonquils, but what?

“What’s the name of your /78 father?” he continued.

Aster sweated and shivered. Bruno had pieced it together. A sting came to his brain before his friend answered. “L-Luis Jonquil.”

An air of shock erupted through the car. “I knew it!” Ryan screamed the same time he started driving again.

Aster shuddered. “Bruno—”

“It’s fine. I had interactions with your father,” Ryan explained briefly. Bruno knew exactly what that sentence entailed. He had just hoped that Aster didn’t. But by the look on his face, he did.

“I see,” Aster rasped.

Awkward silence came. It was so weirdly quiet that Bruno wanted to spout something random. His temptations eventually dwindled as he pushed himself to actually do such a thing.

“So, Aster. Are you fine shopping with us?” he asked.

“Yeah. Anything to get away from my family,” he said.

Bruno nodded, then tilted his head down. “It’s really that bad, huh?”

Aster trembled, as if he was about to explode, then he bursted. “Can we just… Stop talking about them?”

“If that’s what you want,” his friend sighed. His eyes ventured forward to the street sign that spells out “Nettleburg.” The trip was a flash in time.

There was no address written on the note Troy made, but the neighborhood was small enough to not take time searching. Then lightning struck them.

Troy could be on the streets… That’s much more possible than if he’s hiding in a random house around.

Still, they had to look for him. With determination written over him, Bruno yelled, “Stop!” in the middle of the streets. His father obeyed, parking near a house. He gazed at his son shortly after, asking “Why?” /80

“We haven’t got an address, so we’ll look for the guy ourselves,” Bruno said, tired of explaining too much. His father didn’t respond as he expected, he just stayed silent while his son and his friend hopped out of the car, wearing serious faces.

The window on Bruno’s side slid open, revealing a more concerned Ryan. “I’ll park next to the gas station, ok?”

Bruno nodded as he drove away, the glass slowly closing.

Aster gaped his jaw. “So, uh, where do you think Troy could be?” he asked.

No answer came up until Bruno stopped trotting for a few moments. A grim note could be heard when he said, “I think he’s on the streets.”

“Doubt so. Nobody survives being homeless here in New York,” Aster told him bluntly. “I know that, and I’m a foreigner!”

But Bruno didn’t buy it. His head /81 that was once away from Aster turned to reveal his self-assured look. “Well, he’s a magical person. Who knows what they can do? He could very well still be here.”

A groan from Aster propelled Bruno further on the roadsides. Soon enough, his friend followed. At this point, they were having a simple jog until…

Pow!

Troy appeared right in front of Bruno, causing him to bump into the psychic!

“Troy!” Bruno wailed once he backed away.

“Howdy!” Troy greeted playfully.

Aster, who was covered behind Bruno, padded to be at level with him. “You stupid psychic!” he hissed, then his voice raised further, “How dare you teleport me back home without my consent?!”

Troy snickered. “Sorry… For saving you from heartache!”

What the boy said was true. If Aster stayed in school, then he’d /82 experience the same punishments as his classmates. Even Aster relaxed his face to realize what’s going on. Once Bruno noticed though, Aster’s muscles tense. “I don’t care!” A scoff came. “You could’ve just told me.”

Troy rolled his eyes. “You’re always uncomfortable with everything. I know you undergo misfortune because of it,” he snarked.

Bruno and Aster shuddered vacantly in fear. “What do you mean by that?” Their hearts plummeted as they spoke together.

“Aster, you’ll be in danger!” Troy suddenly declared. “But don’t fear. The one you’ve hurt the most will save you.”

Aster snarled. “Weirdo.” His lips curled more. “Freak!”

But Bruno was in genuine fear. The air got colder and before they knew it, clouds began to group together to cover the moon. Shivering, he unexpectedly embraced Aster for warmth. It was freezing. /83 Aster snapped though. “Don’t touch me!” His already sour mood increased.

“Soon…” Troy ominously warned them. “Now go before that fate comes true. It could just be a path in another timeline. If you want me… Then find me where all the souls lie closest to us.”

At once, Troy made a crack of a sound as he disappeared, leaving Bruno and Aster stunned in the dead of night. The orange lights beamed, yet the scene felt so dim.

Aster growled once he pushed Bruno away, yelling, “You’re the reason why we’re in this mess! You’re so righteous, such a hero that you tried to contact an insane psychic to see your death!”

“Calm down, Aster—”

“And you *bribed* me! You… You *touched* me!” Aster seemed to be at a loss for words during his storm of pure frustration.

Bruno was about to gasp but held himself. /84 “Aster,” his tone grew fragile. “I’m sorry.” But the short boy hissed. “Sure.”

Then rain started pouring. It wasn’t violent though, just graceful. Quiet, yet it symbolized something else for him.

As Aster’s hair began to curtain his right eye, he was walking away. He announced, “I’m getting back home, and not with your great papa who hates my own. I’m going by myself.”

While Aster was walking across the road, Bruno was filled with pure fright. Thinking about the enraged short boy irked him. Frozen not only by the temperature of the rain, but also the shock.

Suddenly, the sounds of wheels moving and an engine snarling could be heard from afar, like it was some predator. However, it was close enough to wake Bruno from his anxious trance.

His head swirled to find Aster still walking… But danger was driving to him. /85 It’s a crazy car! Light gray so it blended in the environment, but the sounds and lights made it clear.

“Aster!” Bruno wallowed.

At that, Aster stopped and glanced at his friend with a bored look before darting his sight to the car inching closer and closer to him. Paralyzed by fear, he was a deer in the headlights.

Bruno could tell his friend was frozen in shock. For a moment, he had an urge to jump in and save him, but he could also be too late. The car was fast. With the jolt of his heart though, he launched himself over to the road, both his arms holding Aster tight, gripping him so they can both be in one piece at the other side of the road. Reckless abandoned as he knew Aster despised physical touch—hopefully he knows this is for good.

Once they landed on the concrete /86 ground, Bruno turned his back to see the car still moving, now passing his view. He pictured himself and Aster there, or just Aster, getting crashed and injured.

Then Bruno stared down at his friend in complete awe. Stunned in the heat of the moment. Aster wore the same face as usual once the shock was over. Serious and emotionless, still with a spice of paralysis. Bruno could finally see how he was feeling.

“Are you ok, Aster?” he asked urgently.

But Aster responded with a widened jaw.

“Aster?” Bruno repeated.

“You saved my life. *Again*,” Aster stated in awe.

Bruno knew exactly what he meant. He remembered saving him in another timeline long ago, from drowning specifically. That was the moment Aster gained respect for him. /87

“Of course I did. I always would,” smiled Bruno.

“Thank you,” Aster whispered. His once brash appearance turned milder.

“No need to mention it. You’re my friend, Aster,” responded the boy, his voice also as warm as ever. Then he woke from touching the

ground, once trapping Aster on it, staring at the car, which was far from them at this point. He led out a sigh. “Thank mother it’s gone.”

“Drunk drivers are crazy,” commented Aster. “Let’s hope it crashes into someone else.”

Bruno glared at him before he grinned. “I’m just kidding.” Of course, Aster would chuckle afterwards.

“I’ll get back with my dad. We really need to go shopping now,” Bruno announced.

Aster swallowed. “I’ll come. I said I would before.”

The sudden shift in personality struck Bruno, but he was welcomed to go with him. And so he did with a nod of approval. They set off bruised to Ryan for the night. /88

Chapter 7

New Mission

The next day followed. What dawned was the growing anticipation of what's to come—what news Bruno needed to bring. He won't see a bit of satisfaction in Alex. Yet he even felt tempted to tell everyone. Is it going to be worth the heartache?

"Bruno, what's wrong?" Blossom asked after a harrowing silent bus trip.

He bursted, "I saw Troy yesterday. Aster and I—we were searching for him on the streets and… He predicted Aster getting in a car accident and—" That's when he realized that the prophecy Troy told… It was about the very next moment. Bruno was the one who Aster hurt the most and he saved him

Blossom gulped while he was thinking. "It's okay, Bruno."

Then Aster himself approached them with Alex. "Hey everyone," the latter started. "Aster told me something /89 happened yesterday?"

Bruno explained everything, leaving Aster feeling like he was reliving the recent moments. It stung him. That left Alex feeling like he was in a flurry of rage and concern, leaving toward the former.

"That's ludicrous!" exclaimed Alex, "Troy is onto something, I'm telling you."

At the snap of his name, the devil himself appeared. He had a wicked grin on his face.

"Did I come late to the party?" he joked, but the others were taking him seriously. Alex and Aster were tempered while Bruno and Blossom were gloomy.

Suddenly, the little Aster somehow fully pinned Troy to the ground, catching him off-guard, fully determined to make something out of him. “You snake!” he started hissing, “You’ll regret predicting my near-death experience!” /90

“Mother! I was trying to—”

“I don’t care! Even if you didn’t tell us, I know Bruno would still save me,” argued Aster, booming at Troy.

While Aster made a point, it was also plain to see that Troy was just trying to help. Although his predictions were harmful and delivered in a sarcastic tone, sometimes haphazardly, he did still have a sharp tongue.

“Aster, leave him alone,” ordered Bruno.

But he didn’t want to take it. He said, “Bruno, he could’ve predicted our actual deaths.” His arms were still glued to the psychic’s chest. Then his volume was raised. “Only if Troy learned how to shut his *big mouth*!”

His voice was so blaring, it turned into an echo roaring across the whole school corridor they were stuck in, the one where all the seniors lived. Everyone was outside, so they would hear /91 the indirect confession. That caused the crowd to glare at the scene.

Troy wished he could disappear, but he was too livid to do so. Yet again, he experienced that same pain he felt when he got exiled out of school. The mutterings, the throbbing eyes judging him with its piercing ways.

“Troy, what are you doing here?” a voice roared.

It was the leader of Class 4, Michael. He was followed by Ryder and Peppermint, the other class leaders. Once he spotted Alex, he breathed. “You let this psycho here? Snuck him in? He’s the reason why your class fell apart!”

Alex growled. “I didn’t do that. He teleported himself in!”

When their heads angled towards Troy, who Aster let go of, the shine in his eyes told them that he wanted to prove his loyalty again. “It’s true,” /92 he admitted with anguish. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?!” snarled Peppermint.

Troy seemed to have wanted to get into more detail than needed. “I just want to see this school again. When I got shunned, I truly felt like I lost a part of myself—this amazing community. While I was out in the slums, knowing that my family also sees me as some sick burden, I could only keep teleporting here.” Another, more subtle whisper could be heard from Bruno. “*And I want to see someone here*.”

While Bruno was wincing in sorrow, the leaders couldn’t care less! “Get out!” Michael ordered sharply, with no shred of sympathy to be heard.

Troy whimpered as he got up before Ryder gave him a good punch to the hips, He scampered off, like a cat running. Teleportation wasn’t even considered for him. Clearly, the kids didn’t consider the fact that what Troy confessed may be true. Possibly, they thought he was lying to garner sympathy and to return. /93

Alex gazed at the daunted Bruno.

“It’s for the better,” he assured.

The other leaders seared their sights at the vice leader. They probably guessed that he was involved in this situation, which is sadly true. Alex, knowing of it, spoke before they did.

“Bruno, go and tell Principal Dunkel about all this,” he commanded. Then he leaned for a whisper, “And pretend you didn’t bring Troy here.”

Bruno gulped, then nodded. “I understand.”

Michael stared at Aster. “As for you and your girl, get back to class.” The bold demand forced them to their respective rooms. The Class

4 leader soon gaped at Alex. “Don’t fool around again, or else I have to tell our teachers and the principal,” he threatened. But Alex wasn’t scared like his friends, clenching his muscles.

Bruno set off downstairs, afraid of what might happen if he stays for longer. /94 Trotting past the lively groups lined up to the dead walls, Bruno reached the ground floor, then paved his way to the room.

Knocking on the royal door, the bark coughed. Muffled, the principal could be heard. “Come in.”

The door cried open when Bruno pushed it. He forgot how shaded the area was. All the furniture was either black or red. Dunkel himself sat on a regal throne beside his solid desk, topped by thousands of papers. He wasn’t tending to them, however. Instead, he had a scheming look at him. Like he’s in his supervillain lair.

“Well, well, well, Bruno,” Dunkel said menacingly, “It’s a pleasure to see you. Here to discuss your results?” His lips bounced upon speaking of the last word.

That made Bruno swallow, then sweat /95 and tremble. “No,” he squirmed.

Dunkel played with his pen by twirling it. His looks were at the piece of stationery. “Then is it about…” His eyes swiftly drifted to Bruno’s. “The commotion upstairs?”

The stare the principal gave stabbed the young boy. His heart was wrecked. Somehow, he knew.

“How did…?” Bruno jittered while wondering.

“How?” mocked Dunkel, then scoffed. “I know what everyone in this school is doing.”

Bruno blinked. A train of thought drove by. “Did you install secret cameras?”

“No,” Dunkel instantly denied. “I just… Can sense it.”

The principal certainly was odd.

“Troy had come back, right?” he followed up. With the dip of his head, Bruno stammered, “Yes, principal.” Dunkel cowered subtly.

When Bruno raised his head, he could /96 find how much of a frightening glare Dunkel gave him. The dim air certainly didn’t ease Bruno much either.

“Did you bring him in?” Dunkel asked in a roar.

“No! I was only in the corridor with my friends, then he just… Showed up. Teleported!” recalled Bruno, scampering his words. For a heartbeat, he fretted over getting caught. After all, he was sort of lying. Dunkel knew that the situation was even happening without Bruno telling him. He would’ve definitely guessed of his involvement, right?

But Dunkel said nothing. His index finger only tapped into a daunting rhythm. His stabbing stare could be enough of an answer, yet he did eventually continue to speak.

“You know, Bruno, I joined the school the same day as his downfall,” Dunkel told him.

Bruno got lost, trying to remember /97 his classmates’ tales a few days back. “His downfall?” he asked as he gave up thinking.

“The day your former leader died. The first day of sixth grade for your year,” Dunkel quickly answered as if he was bothered by telling him.

Bruno is now reminded. Only a nod indicated that his principal should proceed.

“Well, I really got to know Troy for such a short time, but from what I heard—he’s truly trouble.” The words of the towering man resonated with Bruno. But only if he could openly talk about his experience with the seer the night prior. Alas, he couldn’t. If he did, then that would reveal his involvement.

“I fear he’ll cause havoc again,” grimaced Dunkel.

“What can we do to drive him /98 out… Or do something like that?” Bruno’s question turned the headmaster’s eyes into that of bloodlust. Silence could be felt through him as the pen that was dancing dropped flatly. His pupils shrank and were at the center, straight at Bruno. His veins flooded with death.

“Kill him,” he suddenly suggested.

Bruno flinched. “K-kill Troy?”

Dunkel laughed hysterically like this was some joke. “Yes!”

The boy shuffled his head. The principal seemed psychotic. “Why?” His voice grew shaky, urgent and flabbergasted.

“You don’t want Troy around. Why not get rid of him that way?” The proposition didn’t sit right with Bruno, of course. He didn’t want Troy to keep randomly appearing in corridors, but violence shouldn’t be the solution—he hoped.

/99“It shouldn’t resort to murder. Sorry, principal, I’m being honest. If you want someone else as some assassinator, then try to get them to do it. You won’t have me to do it, though,” Bruno bluntly told him.

Dunkel visibly scoffed though. “Why can’t we kill him?”

“He’s still young! And nobody deserves to die for being who they are.” The attempt to persuade him was sort of in vain as the principal had a strong scowl. Still, Bruno went on. “And I’m tired of reminding everyone that he’s just a *messenger*! What he speaks of might be dangerous, but he’s *warning* us. He’s trying to help us, sir—!”

“Silence!” Dunkel snapped. Bruno jerked and realized that he had gone too far. He shouldn’t have spoken much! Blood was still in the principal’s eyes. “Why should I care about that? Your peers will feel like they’re in perpetual danger now since they’ve seen Troy. It’s my duty to keep them, or make them feel, safe.” /100

Bruno sighed. Dunkel was a stick in the mud, sure, but usually about petty school matters, not the murder of an innocent alumnus.

"Now, kill him for me," the principal ordered. Bruno felt like a knight being told to slay a dragon, except the dragon here is mostly benevolent and a teenager, like him. Reluctantly, Bruno nodded, but he knew he wouldn't do such a task.

"Now leave," spat Dunkel, scaring Bruno. That caused him to scamper away, out of the silky door. Before he left, he briefly spotted the powerful Dunkel, continuing to stare at him. At that moment, he had a pang in him—that the principal only wanted to kill someone, anyone. Why?

A disgust in Bruno's face came as he finally shut the door, just as disturbed as his stomach was.

The talk paralyzed him. Once he closed the gate behind him, he drooped his body down and sat with his knees bent ahead of him, leaning on the door. He was on the brink of tears as he thought /101 about what was said. The conversation haunted him.

He muttered to himself, "Why did I agree to this?" He made a deal with the devil. The only thing he could do now is to act like he did finish the mission, but would that even have a desirable outcome?

So, crumbled in shame, he propped himself up from wallowing and padded upstairs, directing himself to Class 2. He could shortly see Class 3 upon reaching the ground and Class 4 right across his class—Blossom and Aster's classes. They could be partying while he's stuck thinking about eliminating the psychic teenager.

Once he entered, everyone gave curious glances at him. Murmurs of what could be going on with him erupted. Adam, the chemistry teacher, was standing there, raising an eyebrow too.

“Hello, Bruno,” he slowly greeted.

Bruno groaned. “Hi.”

Adam wanted to go to the point. “Are you ok? I heard from your friends here /102 that you encountered the legendary Troy.”

Bruno shortly sobbed. *Hyk*. He sniffled. Water started to flood in his eyes.

“Bruno?” Adam asked, having notes of worry.

The formerly aggressive classmates turned mellow. Perhaps it’s because Bruno was shivering in remembering the troubled scene. The only one who isn’t warm is Alex, weirdly enough. Spotting his scowl was what broke him.

“Principal…” he breathed. Then he finally cried, but silently as he could.

The shock in the others’ faces was solid. Adam’s cuddly expression was saddened. “What happened, Bruno?” he urged.

Bruno won’t stop breathing like a maniac. His shallow breaths overtook him, infecting his speech alongside the rasps. The distorted voice of his couldn’t articulate anything about him other than his melancholy.

“Principal… Dunkel…” He choked more. “It’s about Troy.” /103

“Oh dear! Did Troy do something again?” Nadia bellowed.

Bruno screamed. “No!” He swallowed. A stream of possibilities drowned him. “Principal Dunkel asked me to kill him. I-I-I don’t want to do that!”

Alex scoffed, then laid his head down. He mumbled, but Bruno heard it clearly. “As if killing someone is so hard for you.”

But that didn’t bother him. His mental state was somewhere else, in the blizzard of anxiety. Meanwhile, everyone muttered. Adam winced, “Mother… Sorry.”

“I’m…” Bruno coughed, “Going to be fine.”

Adam then thought about it, silent to the ground. Soon, he spoke up, “Dunkel wants to kill a kid…” He glared at Bruno, worried. “Why did he jump to that?”

It was a genuine question. No reasonable adult would want to kill a child unless they’re insane, especially a principal who runs a huge school.

/104 “Troy was a troublemaker,” Sarah stated,” A principal needs to do their job.”

Adam hissed for the first time. “Show a bit of sympathy, Sarah!”

Bruno continued to walk beside the teacher’s desk, anguished about the task he reluctantly agreed to fulfill. “What should I do?” he whimpered desperately, like a stray dog begging for a home.

“I don’t know. Dunkel is *ruthless*,” Adam replied. He shivered at the thought of the principal. Certainly, that didn’t comfort Bruno whatsoever. “Just do nothing but pretend you have killed Troy,” Max advised from a distance.

That was a food for thought, yet it was a consideration he had before too. Faking the murder of Troy was all he got, and only keeping that to everyone in the school staff, even if did have the risk of him being discovered and having him be punished… Unless…

Bruno still had the mission deep down to clear Troy’s name in the students’ eyes. /105 Why not try to extend that goal to the principal? Yes, he is obviously stubborn and ruthless as Adam pointed out, but it’s not like Bruno wouldn’t put the effort to help someone.

“I think I know what to do,” he proclaimed. He narrowed his eyes on his classmates. “You’ll see.”

He silently wiped his tears to return to his seat, swallowed by the plans he made while Adam was steadily restarting class.

Bruno stared at the filling whiteboard. His eyes shone with a reinvigorated thirst for solving the issue once and for all. /106

Chapter 8

The First Operation

The